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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000497

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SUBJECT: OSCE ACTIVELY WORKS TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) According to Deputy Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk Vahram Abidjan, the mission's democracy promotion efforts in Belarus focus primarily on monitoring the GOB's actions to fulfill its OSCE commitments. In order to evaluate the GOB's progress, Minsk OSCE Office representatives attend trials, visit prisoners, and observe demonstrations. Additionally, they attempt to use OSCE projects to bring together civil society and government representatives, since few opportunities for such interaction currently exist. Abidjan predicted that change will come slowly to Belarus and that youth actors and economic factors will play key roles in the transformation. He stressed that the international community should utilize tough dialogue, not sanctions, in its relations with the GOB, although he also understood the limitations of less aggressive approaches. End summary.

Monitoring: OSCE's Top Priority

2. (C) Deputy Head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Minsk Vahram Abidjan told Acting DCM that his mission's first priority in Belarus is to monitor the GOB's compliance with its OSCE commitments.

Pursuant to this goal, Abidjan stated that OSCE officers attend trials of opposition activists, visit political prisoners and detainees, and observe opposition demonstrations. Most notably, OSCE Ambassador Oke Peterson received permission to visit political prisoner Aleksandr Kozulin in October 2006; the GOB has repeatedly denied the U.S. Embassy requests for access to Kozulin. Abidjan noted that under the OSCE's memorandum of understanding with the GOB, OSCE representatives have full access to approach anyone. He added that despite some delays in approving requests for visitation, the GOB has presented no major obstacles to this part of the OSCE's work.

Projects Aim to Build GOB-Civil Society Relationship

3. (C) Abidjan explained to A/DCM that the Minsk OSCE Office's projects aim to bring together GOB officials and civil society activists from registered organizations in order to strengthen their relationships. For example, in February the Minsk OSCE office hosted a series of lectures for law students on legal defense and invited OSCE Ombudsmen from Sweden, Poland and Russia, GOB parliamentarians, and civil society experts. Human Dimensions Officer Fiona Frazer lamented to Poloff, however, that long delays and other difficulties in project registration often hinder their ability to initiate projects.

Dialogue, Not Sanctions, Necessary for (Slow) Change

¶4. (C) Abidjan, who is an expert in the region and has worked in Belarus for several years, commented that Belarusian civil society expects rapid change to occur in Belarus like it did in other former Soviet Union countries. However, Abidjan stressed that Belarus' situation is not as dire as those countries. He stated that people's perception of President Lukashenko is good, corruption is not overwhelmingly evident, and the gap between the rich and the poor is not so stark. Therefore, he concluded that change in Belarus would continue to be a slow process, most likely resulting from economic catalysts and not political ones. He added that the youth would most likely play a critical role in this transition since the older generations were too set in their ways.

¶5. (C) Abidjan stressed, however, that the international community should rely on dialogue and not sanctions to influence the regime. He reasoned that the more countries interact and strengthen their relationships, the more influence they have over one another. A/DCM concurred with Abidjan on the importance of engagement but also stressed that when repeated attempts at dialogue have yielded no substantive change in the policies of the regime tougher measures may be necessary.

Comment

¶6. (C) Post values the significant efforts the Minsk OSCE Office has undertaken to promote democracy efforts in

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Belarus. From observing demonstrations and trials, to visiting political prisoners, to finding ways to bridge the chasm between Belarusian civil society and government representatives, the Minsk OSCE Office has been very active in its support for democracy in the country, particularly given the GOB's extreme skepticism towards any engagement with civil society. Under the strong leadership of Ambassador Peterson, who is scheduled to depart Minsk in August, and Abidjan, OSCE Minsk plays a key role in maintaining pressure on the regime for democratic reform, despite the institutional difficulties of working with the GOB. We hope Ambassador Peterson's replacement will be equally persistent and committed to human rights.
Stewart